

THIRD EDITION

THE THEATRE ROYAL BRISTOL

The First Seventy Years

Kathleen Barker, M.A.

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This pamphlet was first published in 1961 as the third of a series on local history issued by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. There was a great demand for it and the first edition was soon out of print. A second edition appeared in 1963 and this embodied a number of revisions made in the light of the discovery, in the below-stage bill-room of the Theatre Royal, of the missing volumes of the Proprietors' Minutes and Account Books, hitherto represented only by the not always accurate extracts made by Richard Smith in the early nineteenth century. In due course the second edition also went out of print. Miss Barker is at present engaged in full-time research for what will be the definitive history of the Theatre Royal, but as it may be some time before this work is completed and published, she has agreed to prepare a third edition of her pamphlet which embodies a number of corrections and revisions.

The production of this edition has been made possible by the generous response received to an appeal for contributions to a fund for reprinting some of the out-of-print pamphlets in the series and by a grant received from the Publications Committee of the University of Bristol.

The Bristol Branch of the Historical Association has now published twenty two pamphlets as well as three reprints. The twenty third pamphlet is now with the printer, and others are in an advanced stage of preparation.

The pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers, from the Porters' Lodges in the Wills Memorial Building and the Senate House, or direct from Mr. Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, 9. It would be of great help if as many people as possible placed standing orders for future productions.

The Theatre Royal : The First Seventy Years

by Kathleen Barker, M.A.

The ambiguous status of the Theatre was never better exemplified than at the period when the Theatre Royal, Bristol, came into existence. From the Elizabethan ruling that all provincial actors might be classed, and treated, as rogues and vagabonds unless they could prove themselves some Lord's "servants," grew the post-Restoration custom of obtaining Letters Patent from the King, or Licences from the Lord Chamberlain or Master of the Revels. If a Company had this backing, it was difficult for the Mayor to refuse a local licence to play.

As more and more such Companies were formed, regular provincial circuits were built up in the early part of the 18th Century. In the summer, actors from the London Theatres took engagements with them, or made up Companies of their own. From these early days, Bath and Bristol were associated, and when John Hippisley, famous as the original Peachum in *The Beggar's Opera*, built Bristol's first permanent theatre at Jacob's Well in 1729, the Bath Company played in the Spring and Hippisley, with a London Summer Company, in the Summer. The site was carefully chosen to be outside the City boundary — for Bristol was strongly Puritanical, and several attempts at establishing theatrical performances there had been suppressed—yet it was reasonably accessible both to citizens and visitors to the Hotwells.

The Licensing Act of 1737 was intended to curb this proliferation of provincial companies, whose connection with the "Lords" they once theoretically served was no longer even nominal. It made all performances outside the London Patent Theatres illegal without special Act of Parliament. However, though the Act served as a discouragement, and in some places did provide a legal pretext for opposition, in many places it came too late: the tradition of theatrical performances was so strong that few Justices would initiate proceedings unless information were laid before them. Companies devised expedients for circumventing the letter of the law, such as advertising a Concert with "specimens of rhetoric" given free.

Certainly Jacob's Well seems never to have been seriously threatened; under Hippisley, and, after his death in 1748, under his daughter Mrs. Jane Green, the idea of a theatre became more and more accepted. Every summer a Company came to Bristol which included the leading actors and actresses of the London theatres, Woodward, Mrs. Pritchard and William Powell for

example—and the theatre continued to prosper. Powell in particular was outstandingly popular with Bristol audiences. A protégé of Garrick's and of Hannah More's, he drew full houses, and after his Benefit performance in 1765 he had to insert in the newspapers a Card of Apology for the number of would-be spectators who had been excluded for lack of room.

The expansion of the City, the prosperity of the Hotwells, and the popularity of the leading actors all contributed to the resolution of some play-going businessmen to purchase a more central site and erect a large building. The attitude to the theatre in the provinces generally was becoming ever more tolerant (the first provincial Royal Patents, to Bath and Norwich, were granted in 1768), and such an undertaking would hardly have been embarked on if the proposers had envisaged any real risk of legal action.

The Minute Book gives vivid, if tantalisingly brief, glimpses of the Committee of Proprietors at work. On 5th November, 1764 it records how Messrs. Edgar and Symons "had been at Portsm^o when they got the Necessary party to execute the Deed of conveyance [of the Theatre site] after attending his attorney, and giving the party Two Guineas to prevail upon him to execute the Deed, that matter being so far settled, and being only at a Distance of 72 miles from London, they set forward for Town when they compleated the contracts wth Messrs. Powell, Clark and Palmer, and at Bath wth Mr. Arthur, that they surveyed and have taken the Measurements of both the playhouses in London, and have also engaged a draft of Drury-lane h^o and consulting a very ingenious Carpenter Mr. Saunders the carpenter of the h^o they have collected such Prints as they flatter themselves will be a means of Saving some hundreds in Building ye Intended h^o in Bristol, that they have also settled a plan in Order to be at a Certainty of securing a good Sett of Players, all Subject to the Ratification of the Committee . . . Also Resolved to Have the Lott of Players now agreed upon, and to Refuse several Others now Objected to And that Mr. Edgar Writes to Mr. Powell accordingly."

No sooner was this settled, however, than the Committee had the offer of another site behind the Boars Head near Limekiln Lane (at the back of what is now Park Street) but negotiations for the King Street site were too far forward, and the idea was dropped. No-one could foresee that a century hence a new Theatre Royal would rise near the very area.

The proposal published was the initial raising of £2000 in forty shares of £50 each, every share to entitle the owner to a free sight of every performance (the famous "Silver Tickets"). The Account Book shows, however, that in fact fifty subscribers paid an initial £50 and forty-seven of them an additional £30. Payment is recorded in November 1764, but it was not till the Theatre was

opened that the admittance of the further ten subscribers was regularised, the original subscribers undertaking to "make up the Whole Sum wanted to Compleat the House." Obviously the Theatre was costing far more than anticipated; nearly £3500 had been paid out by the Spring of 1767, and in 1769 a further call was made on Subscribers "to make up the Sum of £5000—£1090—Less by Sam^l Sedgley not paid—£1040."

The Theatre in King Street was begun in the autumn of 1764. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* of 24th November records: "The Workmen are now employ'd in order to lay the Foundation of the New Theatre, in King-street; which would have been done before this Time, had not a Mistake been made in the Calculation, whereby the House would have been built 8 Feet larger in the Clear, than the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. A Model of that House has been sent for, and the Proprietors seem determined that the Work shall be carried on with great Spirit. The Purchases are made, necessary for the Entrances from King-street and the Rackhay; and another Way will be made into Baldwin-street." The foundation stone was duly laid on 30th November, 1764, and the Committee resolved that the Theatre should be built as nearly as possible according to the Elevation Ground Plan and Section provided by Saunders.

Thomas Party, probably the best-known local architect of the time, was chosen for the new theatre. Richard Smith, an ardent theatre-goer from his boyhood in the 1780's till his death in 1843, tells us: "the house was painted by Mr. Michael Edkins (also a player) . . . Marmaduke Cowle an upholsterer in St. Augustine's Parade furnished the flock paper for the boxes and crimson curtains.—John French a pupil of Loutherburg¹ painted the drop scene and many of the decorations and they were in a most masterly style . . ." Edkins was a painter by profession, best known for his work on Bristol Pottery, but he was also a fine singer and evidently a stage-struck one; in his account book properties for the theatre jostled with everyday orders for shop signs or carriages, and he played minor parts and sang at the Theatre for a number of years.

An early booking-plan of the theatre gives some idea of the arrangement. The benched Pit was circled by nine Lower or Dress Boxes, seating 267 people in all, each named after a British dramatist (Shakespeare in the centre). The sides of the present Upper Circle were divided into six Upper Boxes taking 104, the centre portion serving as Gallery. The present Gallery did not then exist, and the stage came forward past the current Stage Boxes (traces of the supports can still be seen). Proscenium doors gave the actors

¹ French was actually scenic designer for Drury Lane at the time; De Loutherbourg joined him as collaborator in 1771.

entrance to the forepart of the stage, and above these, where our 19th Century imitations show recessed niches, two Slip Boxes were built, seating 22 people each.

Scenery consisted largely of parallel flats run in and out between sets of grooves. The only relics of these activities now are one remaining set of grooves kept as a curiosity at the Theatre, and the rapidly-mouldering "thunder-run," a slatted wooden trough in a sloped Vee, down which iron balls, some of them now used as counterweights on the stage trapdoors, were rolled as storm effects.

It had been hoped to open the Theatre in 1765, but it was not completed until the Spring of 1766. On 10th April of that year, David Garrick himself visited Bristol "and took an accurate view of the new erected Theatre, with which he was very much pleased"—so much so, that he wrote the doggerel Prologue and Epilogue for the opening night on 30th May. In the first night Bill "The Managers hope the Ladies and Gentlemen will not think the Prices fix'd for admission exorbitant, when they will please to consider their very great Expenses: particularly the high Charge of Rent; that the House will be illuminated with Wax, that the Clothes, Scenes and all Decorations are entirely new, and, That they will spare no Pain or Expence to make the Entertainments as Elegant and Pleasing as in the most Established Theatre." These "exorbitant" prices were 4s. for the Boxes (3s. 6d. after the first night); 2s. 6d. for the Pit; and 1s. for the Gallery (afterwards 1s. 6d.), and they remained almost constant for seventy years.

An evening's programme consisted of an Overture, a Five Act Play, Entertainments (dances, songs or instrumental solos) and a Farce or other short afterpiece; the programme was changed completely every night unless a particularly popular novelty allowed repetition. It was possible to come in at the end of Act 3 of the Play at a reduced charge, known as the "Half Price," except where the after-piece was the major attraction, such as a new Pantomime. The first night's programme consisted of Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*, Dancing and *The Citizen*. The net proceeds of Sixty Guineas were given, as a placating gesture, to the Bristol Infirmary Committee: a sum "which was politely received by them." The Company was closely similar to that which had played the previous summer at Jacob's Well.

The troubles of the Committee were by no means at an end when the Theatre eventually opened. The original negotiations had been carried on with William Powell and Matthew Clark (both London actors who had been at Jacob's Well), John Palmer (manager of the Bath Theatre and also closely connected with Drury Lane) and John Arthur (low comedian and Stage Director at Bath). Arthur, however, had an unhappy knack of upsetting the Com-

panies he worked with, and though he played at Bristol in the 1766 season first Palmer and then Powell and Clark refused to share the management with him. Early in 1767 the projected lease was amended to nominate as Lessees Powell, Clark and another leading actor, Charles Holland, and the rent proposed was "Five pounds for every Hundred Pounds we shall expend or lay out in Building the said Theatre, opening the Avenues and all other Matters and Things relative thereto." This lease, too, was declined, possibly because it occurred to the lessees that it would mean their automatically paying 5 per cent interest on expenditure completely beyond their control. It was not until September 1767 that a seven-year (retrospective) lease was signed, at a fixed rent of £300 a year.

During all this time "squibs," pamphlets and sermons continued to be aimed at the new Theatre, but despite threats, the Licensing Act was never invoked against it, although as a precaution the Company initially advertised "A Concert of Music with Specimens of Rhetorick." (In 1768, when the Bath Theatre received its Patent, even this pretence was abandoned.) Each summer the theatre reopened for three evenings a week in a well-balanced repertory. Mrs. Jane Barry, James Dodd, Ned Shuter and Mrs. Bulkley were but a few of the nationally-famous performers supporting Powell and Holland. But in 1769 the concern received heavy blows by the death of both these Managers. Powell was taken ill soon after the season started; he lodged next door to the Theatre, and performances were cancelled to preserve quiet in the street outside. On Monday, 3rd July, *Richard III* was to be acted with Holland in the lead, and Powell died at 7 o'clock, just before the play began. Holland almost broke down as he reached the words "We've all cause To mourn the dimming of our shining star," and when he came forward to announce a change of farce (Dodd had had to go to London) the audience made it clear that they would be content for the performance to end there. Holland died in London later in the year.

After these two deaths, shares in the management changed hands almost every season, with consequent restlessness among the Company. In 1772 there were a number of complaints against Dodd, a delightful player of fops and fribbles, but a less acceptable Manager. He was said to change the farces frequently at the very last moment for no good reason, and to have too many sentimental comedies in the bill, and the London correspondent of the *Bristol Gazette*, recording a poor summer in the provincial theatre generally, added: "Even Liverpool and Bristol, that used to be reckoned the best, have little to boast of this season."

No sooner was the theatre closed than Mrs. Hartley, one of the supporting actresses, wrote to *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* to

complain of being passed over for parts to which she had a right. She claimed that from "the 9th of July to the End of the Season, he [Dodd, as Manager] never offered her a single Part (excepting that of one of the Women in the Beggar's Opera by Way of insult)"—"lest *she* should be *mistaken* for the *principal* actress," she added with heavy sarcasm. Equally sarcastic was the rejoinder from "The Public" the following week that "we are unanimously of the opinion that he might very safely have ventured her playing *every Night* in the Season without the least Danger of her having been ever taken—or (as she expresses it herself) *mistaken* for the *principal Actress.*"

The proprietors were worried about the position. When the initial lease expired they restricted the new one to a term of three years to be granted "only to Persons that are Performers" and a special clause was to be inserted "in order to prevent the possibility of such Lease or Leases falling by Sale or otherwise into the hands of persons who are not possessed of Theatrical Talents for the Entertainment of the Town."

In the autumn a share in the management was offered to John Henderson, later one of the great Falstaffs and Shylocks of the stage, but then just a rising young provincial actor at the Bath Theatre. Henderson went into the question carefully, and his decision, recorded in a letter to his biographer, John Ireland, casts considerable light on the organisation of the Bristol Theatre at the time :

"The most money that has been paid for any share has been four hundred pounds. There are four partners at 400 l. each, and one of them (the not acting manager) has forty pounds a season allowed him for his interest of the 400 l. together with the freedom of the Theatre for himself family and friends. Three hundred pounds a season is paid for the rent, and the fifty proprietors are admitted gratis to all performances whatsoever at the Theatre, which is thought much overloaded. It was rather a losing scheme to Powell and Holland. It is known that Mr. King lost above eighty pounds the season he held it; and the last season, 'tis said, each partner lost between one and two hundred pounds.

"The whole property belonging to the partners, of clothes, scenes, &c. is supposed to be worth under a thousand pounds, and there are only two years to come of the lease. There are three votes of the three acting managers in the conduct of the theatre."

Henderson must have congratulated himself later on his decision, for a very unsettled period was to ensue. In November 1772 a touring company under Booth and Kennedy set up in the

2 John Ireland: *Letters and Poems by the late Mr. John Henderson* (1786) pp. 96-100.

Coopers' Hall under the old pretence of presenting "A Concert of Music" with "divers Specimens of ELOCUTION". An information was nevertheless laid and sustained by the Magistrates, the performers being fined a total of £200. The Theatre proprietors and lessees (who were suspected of being concerned in the attempted suppression) realised that their own position was no safer, and hastily embarked on an application for a Royal patent, arousing a flurry of controversy. Petitions against the Patent were sent to Members of Parliament and the Bishop of Bristol. They met with some sympathy but little action (the Bishop's reply, as quoted in the local press, is a masterpiece of evasion). The Bill for licensing the Playhouse was brought in at the beginning of March, but was blocked. This abortive attempt cost the proprietors £161, and the matter was allowed to rest until February 1778, when they obtained a Patent for Bristol with a minimum of fuss.

It is an interesting comment on the practical ineffectiveness of the 1737 Act, however, that not only did a fine penal by contemporary standards fail to deter Booth and Kennedy from completing their season at the Coopers' Hall and publicly advertising it, but they actually returned the following winter, though with much less success.

Nor was any action apparently taken against the King Street Theatre company, despite its equal "illegality." However, Dodd found himself in trouble from another quarter. He fell foul of Mrs. Green, who as Hippisley's daughter and a native of Bristol was very popular here both personally and as an actress. She declared that Dodd had "made her whole Summer disagreeable by his rude Behaviour," and that he had been heard to vow that "she should never belong to the Company if he could help it"; and consequently she regretfully declined playing that season. There were other accusations of public rudeness against Dodd, and at the end of the season he sold his share to Samuel Reddish, leading actor at Drury Lane.

Initially Reddish showed great zeal, engaging an excellent Company from the London theatres, improving the stock of scenery and costumes, and paying more attention to the selection of new popular plays in the repertoire. Before the 1775 season he undertook "new painting and fitting up the Theatre in a very elegant manner, and adding several new Scenes," and lighting it with spermaceti candles. Simultaneously he raised the Box price to 4s. and offered a type of "Season Ticket" admission—the first twenty-four nights of playing for Two Guineas. Henderson played for him, and, as Genest tells us,³ "from the accidental indisposition of a

³ Genest: *Some Account of the English Stage* (Bath, 1832), Vol. V. p. 535. Genest has, however, confused his dates: 17th August was not a playing day at Bristol.

performer on August the 17th he played Falstaff," a performance which was to become his most famous. Unfortunately this successful season ended on a familiar note: Quick (who made his name as the first Tony Lumpkin) accused Reddish of stopping his Benefit out of jealousy at his popularity, and Reddish, piqued by a rumour that Clarke had sold his management share to Quick, vowed he would not return to Bristol if this were true.

It was not, and both Reddish and Quick came back, but almost immediately there was trouble over the position in the Company of Reddish's wife, formerly Mrs. Canning (and by that marriage mother of the future Prime Minister). This came to a head when the Benefits took place. Mrs. Reddish was hissed during hers, and three of the leading actors, Samuel Cautherley and Mr. and Mrs. Jackson, were accused of organising the trouble. Reddish refused to act in Jackson's Benefit play because his wife had not been cast in it; accusation and counter-accusation enlivened the columns of the Bristol press, and with a month of the season to go, Reddish and his wife walked out on the Company, leaving Quick and Clarke to manage as best they might.

Robert Bensley joined as leading man for these two Managers the following season. Earnest was their quest after "Novelty," and in 1778 they reduced the Gallery price to 1s. while abolishing the "Half Price." The season ended in a blaze of glory with a visit from the tragic actress Mrs. Crawford, who had been the wife of Spranger Barry, Garrick's chief rival.

It was in 1778 that the Theatre was opened for the first time for a winter season. A Company led by Jefferson of Drury Lane opened on 30th November with *As You Like It*, and the season included the first performance in Bristol of *The School for Scandal*, which gave the Managers the excuse to raise the Gallery price to 1s. 6d. again. This evoked prompt protests, and within a fortnight the Pit prices were reduced to 2s. and the Gallery to 1s. with no Half Price. This season ended on 8th March, and two days later the Bath Theatre Company, without preliminary announcement (and in apparent contradiction of the terms of the Theatre Royal lease), took possession and began a fortnight's engagement. This Company included Mrs. Siddons, whose first recorded performance at Bristol was as the Countess of Salisbury in a play of that name on Monday, 15th March.

Supporters of the previous Managers claimed defiantly that "so far from being alarm'd at the experience of the Bath Company," they were "rather pleased by it, as it can only end with their being in future, uninterruptedly fix'd in that property—it being already pretty plain, that no receipts can possibly repay the enormous expense of bringing their company, musicians, scenes, &c. over

here." Nevertheless, in April it was announced that Palmer of the Bath Theatre had been granted a 20-year lease at £200 a year plus ground rent and taxes, on his promising to "make an entire alteration to the theatre, enlarge the lobby, to build an elegant tea room and other accommodations." In consideration of this the Proprietors renounced claim to three years' rent. Palmer's Company, headed by William Wyatt Dimond and Sarah Siddons as straight leads, Mr. and Mrs. Brett as singers, and Edwin as comedian, played once a week till the end of May.

So began the formal association of the Bath and Bristol Theatres, operated in circuit from September to July. There were three performances a week in Bristol and one in Bath until mid-November; thereafter Bristol had plays on Monday nights only until the Benefits, which usually began in early June. Dimond, who became Joint Acting Manager with Keasberry early on, was a notable figure—a popular straight actor in perhaps a slightly "old-fashioned" style (though it is said Sheridan considered him the finest exponent of Joseph Surface he had seen), and an honest and much-loved Manager in days when neither adjective was commonly applied. Round him more than any other personality the Bath and Bristol Company was built, and when he retired from the stage in 1801, it was not altogether fanciful to say that something went out of the spirit of the Company which was never replaced.

It would be gratifying to local pride to claim—as in fact was often done in retrospect—that Bristol "discovered" the merits of Mrs. Siddons. It is nearer the truth to say that, successful and highly-esteemed as she was, in elegant Comedy as much as in the Tragedy we more readily associate with her name, equally laudatory notices may be read in the Bristol papers of actresses whose names have been long forgotten. When she left the Company in June 1782 after producing her famous "Three reasons for quitting this Theatre" (her three children), it was well before the end of the run of Benefits, so that while she had been able to call on all the Company to play for her, she herself was not available to lend lustre (and box-office appeal) to most of their special nights. Instead, she went off on a highly successful provincial tour of her father's old circuit. No doubt this accounts for the note of asperity detectable when one of her fellow-actresses three weeks later produced "Three Reasons for her *Continuance* on the Bristol Stage."

The leading actors from this circuit were engaged regularly, often for leading parts, at the London theatres, and the management was held in high esteem. In a period which undoubtedly represented the heyday of the provincial Stock Company, only the

York circuit could dispute its pre-eminence. Among future stars of the British stage were Julia Betterton (later Mrs. Glover), the singer Charles Incledon, and Robert William Elliston, the future flamboyant manager of the Surrey Theatre, and, disastrously, of Drury Lane. He made his first appearance in Bath on 14th April, 1791, as Tressel in *Richard III* (a part imported by Cibber into his adaptation of Shakespeare) and repeated it in Bristol on the 25th. After a period with Tate Wilkinson at York, he returned in October 1794 to play second leads to Dimond, gradually taking over from him those parts requiring youthful buoyancy or comic verve. In 1796 his Benefit realised £146.

Another popular actor was the "heavy," Charles Murray, whose daughter married Henry Siddons, later managing the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh (they may have met when young Siddons played a few nights in Bristol and Bath in February 1796). So popular was Murray that when he withdrew from playing the part of Manly in *The Provok'd Husband*, and Dimond offered it to a comparatively minor actor, Eyre, as an encouragement, Eyre met with hisses and catcalls when he took the stage, rumour having spread that he had "arrogantly taken the part from Murray." The next time a similar thing happened, Eyre took care to have it printed in the bills that he played through the original actor's indisposition.

The even tenor of success was not, however, uninterrupted. Bristol still had its moral censors, and when Brett, disappointed at the failure of his wife's Benefit in 1782 (there was a 'flu epidemic, and although it was Sarah Siddons' last appearance, the total receipts were only £24. 13s.), got drunk and created a disturbance, the Managers immediately discharged him. In February 1784 illness depleted the Company's singing strength, and in emergency Brett was invited down from London to take over. Despite the two years' interval, and the publication of a preliminary apology in the Press and playbills, he was booed off the stage, and promptly returned to London in understandable pique. Eight years later, Brett's daughter caused a further sensation by running off with the husband of another actress in the Company.

A storm broke out when Reynold's *Werter* was given its premiere in December 1785. A long and, on balance, unfavourable examen of the play included a complaint by the critic that "my attention at the Theatre was much distracted by a noisy party behind, and my sight obstructed by the immense hats of the ladies before me" — both frequently reiterated complaints not confined to the 18th Century.

Moreover, despite the popularity of the leading actors, there was a good deal of criticism of the acting of minor parts, discrepancies of costume (a Roman Ambassador in a powdered wig

FAMOUS BRISTOL THEATRE MANAGERS



William Powell (1735-1769) as Posthumus
in *Cymbeline*, a favourite part.



Below: William M'Cready (1755-1829)



William Wyat Dimond (c. 1740-1812) as
Romeo, with Miss Wallis, later Mrs.
Campbell, as Juliet.

Whale: Oh, my dear Master's word! — you cursed old
Thief, bring him to life again, or —

Col: Hush, you fool, I am your Master, the Magician
lives in the body of our Elk yonder, but I have his power
now (my first use of it shall be to free Colombine)
Whale Mischief come, my good old friend, from the
Arsyvatican Room (brought the Elk to Col.)

Whale: Ha! ha! ha! Egad if this is our Magician, I
find he's no Conjuror. (R) J. Bell, to raise Col.

Col: How whalebone to see my Colombine. (touched
the Drum) Soft Music — the Drum opens, Colombine
appears, She goes to Harlequin who is on the Ground

Col: My dearest Love! no more

Whale: Nonsense, Child, look this is your dearest Love
(points to Col.)

Col: What the vile Magician — never!

Whale: (to Col.) Master, you had best whip into your
own skin again.

Col: By the power of this Ring, I wish to live again
in my own proper form. (this done,) Soft Music. Harlequin

A page from an Ms. Prompt Book belonging to William M'Cready,
now in the City Archives; it comes from John O'Keefe's 18th C.
Pantomime, *Lord Mayor's Day, or A Flight to Lapland*. Note the
direction to ring the Trap Bell for Columbine's trick entry through
the drum.

A Booking Plan of the Theatre Royal in 1773, showing what are now the Dress and Upper Circles.

To Paint a Box for West Indian
receiving 21st Stephens Postage Due 1-0

To Wearing and Varnishing the
Transparency for the Invasion
Paint of thereon a Castle with a
Stream with Shakespeare with
Transparent 2 12 6

To Paint 5 Chairs both sides &
To Paint of part of the Cottage in
the Invasion 3 6

To Paint a Trick Table with
a Fire in Flames &c 5

To Paint of the stump of the
Tree and Harlequin pocket both sides 3 0

To Paint of Snips Arrows 2 6

To Paint Flowers Intended for
the Pique Wings afterwards putt
on the May Pole 10 0

Entries from the Account Book of Michael Edkins, singer, minor
actor and painter, showing scene- and property-painting for a
Pantomime revival, *Harlequins Invasion of the Realms of
Shakespeare*, in June 1778

and white gloves, for example), and of faults in production, such as "extras" grouped in straight lines, and actors inattentive to the play when not actually speaking. All these suggest to modern ears the amateur rather than the professional theatre, but were probably inevitable under repertory conditions.

A change gradually came over public taste: the Managers felt bound to advise Murray not to play Lear for his Benefit in 1787 because when they had last produced it three years previously they had lost heavily, and in 1790 "The Wanderer" wrote, perhaps too gloomily, in the *Bristol Journal*: "Some of our most meritorious plays are frequently represented at our Theatre, almost to empty benches; and, excepting two or three instances, the players are generally *losers* by their benefits." Melodrama, sentimental comedy and pantomime held the drawing power, and as the century neared its close, the system of having visiting "stars" from the London theatre began to grow up, to the detriment of Stock Company standards.

In 1800 Dimond and Palmer were responsible for the biggest alteration to the theatre's structure so far: the creation of a new raised ceiling so as to permit building a Gallery tier above the Upper Boxes—the form, in fact, in which we know the auditorium of the Theatre Royal to-day. The house was repainted "a stone colour, and the pannels a tender green, with gold mountings and cornices; the columns that support the two rows of boxes are cabled with stone colour and gold alternately." New lustres were fitted, and the raising of the ceiling was said greatly to improve the acoustics of the theatre. However, the "Gods" complained that the seats were not sharply enough raked to allow a clear view of the front of the stage, so in the autumn the Gallery was altered again to meet this objection. Dimond and Palmer undertook to spend not less than £1000 on this alteration and the building of a "large Commodious Scene Room."

In 1801 the Bath and Bristol Companies set up a Benevolent Fund, for which a Benefit was allowed alternate years in each city. This fund had a chequered career, and after the circuit broke up in 1817, rapidly petered out. The rather sordid story, as it affected one of the most loyal and longest-serving actresses in the Company, Miss Summers (who had supported Mrs. Siddons), can be found in Genest.⁴ The same summer Dimond retired from the stage, though not from management, the Duke and Duchess of York presenting him with a "magnificent Silver Cup and Cover." This left Elliston unrivalled in the leading parts, but soon he began negotiations for London engagements which overlapped his provincial contract, and he divided his year between the two, travel-

⁴ Genest: *op. cit.*, Vol. IX: , pp. 73 *et seq.*

ling hectically between London and Bath or Bristol until he finally left in 1804.

Charlton took over as Acting Manager—resident producer would be the nearest modern equivalent—but personally popular though he was, he had neither the principle nor the business sense of Dimond. The old favourites one by one retired, “stars” became more and more important, and after Dimond’s death at the beginning of 1812 the Company began to lose its hold on the public, at least in Bristol, despite the judicial closure, at the expense of £12 shared between the Proprietors and the Managers, of the “illegitimate” Regency Theatre in Prince Street.⁵

The site of the Theatre Royal, too, was beginning to prove a disadvantage. As the squares and crescents of Clifton were built in the early years of the 19th Century, there was a move out of the City area, which became very much a “trade” quarter, divorced from the social “ton.” Moreover, as a newspaper correspondent complained, there was some difficulty of access, as the first permanent bridge over the Frome was well down river — roughly where Electricity House is now. Clifton began to make its own social entertainments, and the patronage of the “gentry,” save for the real enthusiasts, fell gradually away.

1815, however, was a notable year: it saw Edmund Kean’s first performances in Bristol, and also those of a very different actor, William Charles Macready, who was to be closely connected with the Bristol theatre personally and through his family. Macready joined the Stock Company, playing among other parts Richard II —rarely performed at that time. Bristolians, however, were beginning to resent the dominance of Bath; the action against the Regency had aroused considerable feeling; and when Palmer nevertheless sought to renew the lease in the summer of 1817, he was faced with conditions about the improvement of the property which he deemed unacceptable, and the long-standing link with Bath was broken.

Bristol was not alone in experiencing this decline: the growing dominance of London “stars,” the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars and the stirring of social unrest as the Industrial Revolution began to change the pattern of English life, all contributed to the gradual decline of provincial circuits everywhere. The break-up did not, in most cases, come till later in the century, but already in many parts of the country the once well-established Managers found themselves fighting a losing battle.

At the end of June 1817, the Committee advertised for a lessee. Elliston made a bid, offering to share “half and half in expenses

⁵ For a brief account of this theatre, see my article in the *Bristol Evening Post* of 5th September, 1956.

and profits" with the Proprietors, but this made no appeal. Instead, the Theatre was let, apparently advantageously, to John Boles Watson, already Manager of the Cheltenham and Gloucester theatres, who promised that "under his unremitting exertions, the Drama will assume a style of propriety, correctness and elegance which will at once both merit and receive the approbation of those who may honour it with their patronage." For his projected experimental season of twelve nights he offered a Season Ticket system, and promised new decorations and chandeliers "of the Grecian make," an "Anti-Entrance Room" (*sic*) to the Lower Boxes for "those who frequent the half-play," a refreshment saloon for the Upper Boxes, and, by removing an inconvenient staircase, an improvement to the street entrances to Pit and Gallery.

Alas for these promises! A florid redecoration of the theatre did indeed take place, but apart from the Proprietors' action in creating separate entrances to the Upper and Lower Boxes, none of these projected improvements was carried out. The management soon acquired a wretched name; Richard Smith comments "The whole House was gloomy and sombre and the stench of the tallow intolerable—into the Bargain he could not pay his rent so that at last the Proprietors were obliged to put an execution on his Wardrobe and Scenes and other moveables and sold the whole—being themselves purchasers to the amount of £250 but even then the loss was considerable—and the Theatre in disrepute."

In these circumstances the Proprietors once more tried to treat with the Bath Company through Dimond's son, but to no effect. Early in 1819 the Theatre was again advertised, and four applications were received: from Henry Lee of the Taunton Theatre, Robert Hoy, the Worcestershire manager; H. W. Grosette, one of the Bath company, and 64 year-old William M'Cready, father of William Charles, who had made an unsuccessful bid for the Bristol management in 1799, and had just given up the management of the Newcastle and Whitehaven theatres. M'Cready, a generous but quick-tempered Irishman, had spent his life in provincial theatre management, and despite more than one bankruptcy had the knack of always retaining the affection (albeit sometimes the exasperated affection) and respect of all around him.

No happier choice could have been made. M'Cready was a man of unbounded energy and wide contacts, and drew largely on both. William Charles Macready and two other stars, Daniel Terry and Mrs. Yates, opened his "season of experiment" with *Othello*, and during the summer recess M'Cready installed "that brilliant mode of illumination, the gas-light"—an up-to-the-minute innovation which, however, cruelly exposed the "puppet-show decorations" of

his predecessor. Between the Autumn Fair season and the winter M'Cready undertook to carry out Watson's promise of a Half-Price Saloon, but ran into trouble over Ancient Lights, and by the time the Theatre re-opened he could only offer "a 'Boudoir' . . . the best that a very limited space, shortness of time, and every other disadvantage would allow," but it was warmly received by those who previously had had to wait in a draughty, unheated corridor.

M'Cready had engaged Charles Westmacott, who had been responsible for fitting up the Birmingham Theatre, to repaint the scenic leavings of Watson, but Westmacott, after working for some time apparently quite happily, walked out leaving the work half-done. Carroll, the Company's scene-painter, completed Westmacott's work, while Whitmore, scenic artist at Covent Garden, "in his zeal for the welfare and prosperity of Bristol theatricals under its present Director," presented the Theatre with a new drop-scene.

The house was painted a light salmon-colour; on the panels of the Boxes were the various national floral emblems in gold. The stage doors were white and gold, and the pilasters on either side of the stage were said to "appear like Sienna marble." The ceiling represented an open sky, with Cupids in different attitudes.

The first night of the season lived well up to theatrical tradition. The gas went out three times, and "for some time, a few mutton lights, collected in haste and thrust upon the stage, served to render the darkness visible, and prevented the Performers from knocking their noses against each other." The audience, in perfect good humour, sang "God Save the King" every time the lights went out, and in fact the only person who seemed at all put out was poor M'Cready, who came on to apologise profusely for the failure of supply, and was greeted with cheers and rounds of applause.

M'Cready was a shrewd man, and his programme was well-balanced. Dramatisations of Scott, 18th Century comedies (his real love, according to his son), Shakespeare and spectacle were nicely blended. A number of his prompt-books may still be examined among the City Archives. "Stars" he brought in plenty, but ensured that his Stock Company was strong enough to do without them—as for at least one season it virtually did. An elaborate production of *A Winter's Tale* and another of *Richard II* in a version specially prepared by William Charles, were mounted by the Company unassisted.

In his leading lady, Sarah Desmond, who had played for him at Newcastle, M'Cready had an impressive actress in parts ranging from Hermione to Meg Merrilees; their marriage in 1821

(M'Cready was a widower) gave her an even closer interest in the fortunes of the Theatre Royal.

M'Cready could never rest. In 1820 he had William Edkins, son of the original painter of the Theatre, redecorate it, in "warm drab," maroon and much gilt ornament on ceiling and boxes alike, and the Boudoir was at last completed. Again in 1823 Edkins went to work, and again in 1826, when M'Cready removed the Georgian proscenium doors and substituted two private boxes on the stage, continuing the line of the Dress Boxes. The "Old Fashion" of a Green Curtain was revived at the same time.

It should not be thought that M'Cready had an untroubled passage. He had to restore not only the artistic prestige but, even more important in contemporary provincial eyes, the moral standing of the theatre. He was not helped when, within months of his opening, Junius Brutus Booth, who was starring in Bristol at the same time as an acrobat known as Il Diavolo Antonio, became involved with Antonio's wife. A country expedition to Kingsdown brought matters to a head, and finally the Sunday evening peace of Queen Square was shattered by a pistol duel, in which Antonio was wounded. Booth acted as usual on Monday; on Tuesday he should have played for M'Cready's Benefit, but though he came to the theatre, he panicked and left again before the performance. Eventually the quarrel was made up, and Booth played Richard III for Antonio's Benefit (a "bumper," it is pleasing to add), but by that time the whole affair, with the inevitable trimmings of half-informed gossip, was all over the city.

There were also occasional disturbances in the theatre. Loyalty to the House of Hanover was demonstrated by the insertion of patriotic songs such as "Rule Britannia" and "God Save the King." All good Englishmen would then rise and doff their hats, but one night "a person was observed in the pit with his hat on his head . . . 'A Radical!' was immediately whispered about, and the obnoxious hat was knocked off. The whole house was thrown into confusion by this incident." At the close of the national anthem, the audience clamoured for its repetition, but the obstinate pittite still persisted in wearing his hat "until the indignation of those in the pit became so extreme, that he deemed it prudent to retire." There was, alas, rather an anti-climax to this fine demonstration of patriotism, for the naughty Radical was found instead to be a much-puzzled foreigner, "uninterested in our political affairs and almost a stranger to our language."

M'Cready's quick temper, too, led him into many disputes with the local newspapers, who, keen supporters of his enterprise as they were, would not always praise without reservation—and M'Cready took no more kindly to adverse criticism than most theatrical

managers. It is clear from the often long and detailed criticisms of performances that the standard of minor actors—and sometimes of major ones—and the consistency of dress, decorations and behaviour still left much to be desired. *Macbeth*, for example, was still played with its late 17th Century spectacular witch scenes to Locke's music, and these provoked a number of cutting criticisms. "With all due humility, and strict attention to the feelings of 'families,'" wrote the critic of *The Thespian*, "we beg to record it as our opinion that the *Witches* in *Macbeth* ought to be otherwise employed than counting heads in the gallery, or waltzing to the choruses . . . As to costume, we say nothing. We have proof that the weird sisters could look into futurity, and we willingly believe that the same foresight enabled them to anticipate the fashions of modern times." A particularly heavy and unintelligent performance of *Romeo* drew the comment: "Friar Laurence says 'The lover may bestride the idle gossamer,' but he would have suppressed this truth if he had seen Mr. Montague."

The practical interest shown in his father's venture by William Charles Macready may no doubt be partially attributed to the fact that his money had enabled old M'Cready to assume the management in the first place. His long-standing connection with the city, begun with the Bath and Bristol Company, was maintained by frequent visits, and his personal rectitude certainly did him no disservice in a city as strict as Bristol. The story has often been told, and can be found in full in Macready's *Reminiscences*, of how he interested himself in a young actress, Catherine Atkins, and introduced her to his father in 1821 for engagement with the Bristol Company. During his visits to Bristol "love approached under friendship's name," and in the summer of 1823 they became engaged, Miss Atkins leaving the stage permanently. Part of their honeymoon in 1824 was spent at Weston-super-Mare and Congresbury.

Despite the inevitable ups and downs of management, and at least one near escape from yet another bankruptcy, M'Cready and his wife evoked a strong personal feeling among Bristolians. M'Cready was a prominent Mason in the Lodge of which Richard Smith, collector of theatrical records, was Master, and their interest was always employed on his benefit night. When he died, on 11th April, 1829, the newspaper obituary spoke sober truth in saying: "His loss will be deeply felt and regretted by his family and a wide circle of friends. He was indeed universally esteemed, and the qualities both of his head and his heart, were such, as would have done honour to any profession." A tablet to his memory is in Bristol Cathedral off the passage leading to the Chapter House.

The season was completed, Fraser the Stage Manager assuming

responsibility, and William Charles coming down to play on the last night. He wrote to the Proprietors to ask if they would transfer the remainder of the existing Lease to Richard Brunton (formerly concerned with the Plymouth Theatre) and grant Brunton a further lease for three years, giving his personal guarantee for the punctual discharge of the rent. This proposal, he felt, would be "the means of material benefit to my late Father's Widow." Accordingly the Proprietors made out a lease to Brunton and Macready jointly, a lease to which is added a fascinating inventory of the fittings and scenery then stored or in use at the Theatre Royal.⁶ Brunton, with the help of his father, was the active partner in running the theatre, and Macready's name was hardly mentioned although his interest can be seen from, for example, the choice of Bristol for a "try-out" of Byron's *Werner*, adapted by Macready, and with himself in the leading part, which took place on 23rd January, 1830. His stepmother, M'Cready's widow, continued in the Company as leading lady.

An absentee manager, however, is of little help in day to day affairs, and Brunton had been in financial difficulties before ever he came to Bristol. With M'Cready's death instability came again to the theatre; standards declined, houses fell off, and the biggest draw of 1830 was "the talented and stupendous ELEPHANT" for whom the Rackhay entrance was enlarged. The first season made a profit, but the second, despite some lavish operatic productions, including Rossini's *Cinderella*, and visits by Miss Smithson and Charles and Fanny Kemble, was disastrous. Brunton could not meet his obligations, and the Company was in such straits that the Kembles, though considerable sufferers themselves, offered a Benefit performance, the proceeds of which, some £150, paid off a little over a quarter of the Company's arrears of salary.

The circumstances of Brunton's bankruptcy are somewhat mysterious. Charles Mason, the leading actor, publicly averred that it was almost wholly due to the treachery of an unnamed friend of Brunton's, who had lent him money to pay off his creditors in Birmingham and enabled him to take up the Bristol lease, and at a later date had demanded additional security in the shape of the surrender of the lease itself to him. Brunton took legal advice, and told his friend this was impossible, whereupon the friend descended upon the theatre and took possession of the actual receipts at the door, including those for Charles Kemble's Benefit. The Company not unnaturally declined to continue acting "merely to put money into his pocket . . . the reply was, that the money obtained should be held in defiance of all claims," and nothing Brunton could do would, apparently, move him. The iden-

⁶ See *Studies in English Theatre History* (Society for Theatre Research, 1952), pp. 98-113.

tity of the treacherous friend, and the inaction of Macready, remain at present a mystery.

Brunton evaded trouble by transferring his share in the Theatre to Macready, who promptly surrendered the lease, and eventually the Proprietors succeeded in letting the house to General Charles Palmer of Bath, for whom B. P. Bellamy was, as Smith puts it, "agent and factotum," and Stage Manager. Bellamy had offered for the theatre after M'Cready's death, without success.

Palmer and Bellamy promptly laid out a sum estimated at over £800 in repairing and renovating the theatre thoroughly. Proscenium doors were reinstated, M'Cready's ex crescent private boxes were scrapped; the stage was re-laid; the lighting equipment was completely overhauled, more illumination now being concentrated on the stage and less on the auditorium. Rotten timbers were renewed. New staircases were made which would restrict the circulation of prostitutes. The lobbies of both Circles were enlarged and heating put in, the Dress Boxes subdivided and the whole house newly upholstered.

A successful October opening was interrupted by the Bristol Riots, but for the re-opening at the end of November Bellamy secured the services (such as by that time they were) of Edmund Kean, followed by the engagement of Paganini, the virtuoso violinist. On the pretext of the enormous fee demanded, the manager raised the prices of seats to 10s., 7s. and 3s. 6d. and tried to avoid honouring the silver tickets. His popularity was not increased when it was revealed that the fee had been proposed by Bellamy himself. The house was filled, but at a time of national distress caused by epidemics of cholera, comment was acid. Moreover, the *Bristol Gazette* sorrowfully described Bellamy's Company as "the worst we have ever witnessed on the Bristol boards."

A certain note of desperation creeps into the contemporary advertisements and reviews, and after a week in which "Monsieur Martin and his WONDERFUL TRAINED ANIMALS" starred in a specially written piece called *The Lions of Mysore*, Bellamy closed the theatre in July with thinly-veiled reference to his losses.

Acrimonious correspondence, related in some detail in the Minute Books of the period, began between the Proprietors and General Palmer over arrears of rent. Bellamy finally reopened the theatre in February 1833 in conjunction with that at Bath, as "an almost desperate undertaking"—the Bath Theatre being in no better case financially. The Proprietors permitted this opening only on the understanding that Palmer removed none of the scenery, &c., and that the rent of £20 weekly was regularly paid. The lavish expenditure on the fabric of the theatre was no compensation, in the eyes of the Proprietors, for a total of £595 arrears of rent from which they might have received dividends.

The theatre closed, "rather suddenly" (as the *Bristol Gazette* put it), in June, and Bellamy claimed cautiously that his venture had been "to a certain extent, successful," but he was, with good reason, doubtful about the future. Only £240 of the arrears had been paid off, and after much bad-tempered and fruitless argument the Proprietors decided to cut their losses: once more the Theatre Royal was to let.

There had been one constant factor among the turbulence of Brunton's and Bellamy's managements: the popularity of M'Cready's widow, who continued as leading lady in every Company. With many misgivings, Sarah M'Cready offered to reopen the Theatre for three months at a rent of £100 payable by weekly instalments of £10, and was sufficiently encouraged by her success during this period to continue with the management. Even after her death in 1853, the Macready link with the Bristol theatre was maintained through their daughter Mazzerina, for her husband James Chute, who had joined the Stock Company in 1839, had for some years been helping his mother-in-law with the management, and took over the lease when she died. Thus began the Chute connection with the Bristol Theatre which lasted unbroken until the 1930's.

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